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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ABUJA 002622

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: VIOLENCE ERUPTS IN KANO, ELSEWHERE CALM

Classified by Ambassador Howard F. Jeter; Reasons 1.5 (b) & (d)

1. (C) Summary: Violence erupted in Kano over the October 12-14 weekend for a multiplicity of reasons, chiefly criminal opportunism and internal political rivalries but also including anti-U.S. sentiment over air strikes against the Taliban and bin Laden. Twenty-five people were killed, over 200 were arrested and numerous buildings (mostly shops) were damaged and looted, according to a reliable GON source. (Some other sources claim a death toll exceeding 100.) The source reports that Kano is quiet but tense. The military remains in control of security. This violent scrum is evidence of the febrile air hovering over parts of Northern Nigeria. While the military may provide the short-term fix, the Obasanjo Administration will have to ply a sagacious political strategy to minimize tension or this type of eruption will be a recurrent theme. Amcits are safe and none were reportedly caught up in any of the clashes. End summary.

PEACEFUL MARCH, VIOLENT AFTERMATH

2. (C) After Juma'at prayers October 11, a planned demonstration of 500-600 protestors, apparently affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, left the Central Mosque, reportedly chanting anti-U.S. and pro-Bin Laden slogans. They burned U.S. flags as well as pictures of President Bush and Foreign Minister Lamido who, earlier this week, issued the official GON public statement supporting U.S. air strikes in Afghanistan. The protestors attempted to march towards Sabon Gari, Kano's predominantly Christian section, but were thwarted by police. By 6 PM, the group dispersed without serious incident. (Comment: Sparks likely would have flown had the procession reached Sabon Gari. Demonstrators knew the potential repercussions of heading in that area - indicating they were not averse to confrontation. End Comment.)

3. (U) Around midnight, roughly six hours after the march had ended, two small churches were burned on Kano's outskirts. Around ten a.m. on Saturday, a large mob of Muslim "area boys," started toward Kano's largest market, which lies on the edge of Sabon Gari. Both Christian and Muslim shopkeepers attempted to defend their shops, according to Rev. Zakka Nyam, the Anglican Archbishop of Kano. Nyam stated that the thugs did not push into Sabon Gari even though two mosques in Sabon Gari were burned in retaliation for the earlier church arson.

4. (U) By 3 p.m., with the police unable to stifle the melee, the military arrived to restore order. The military's use of live ammunition eventually dispersed the mob.

5. (U) After contacting several GON sources and eminent people in Kano, Rev.

Obaje, Chaplain at the Presidential Villa and Chairman of Nigeria's Inter-Religious Council, told Ambassador Jeter October 14 that Kano was quiet but tense. By the time the unrest subsided, 25 people had died, many more were wounded, over 200 had been arrested and dozens of shops and cars had been damaged. The VOA stringer in Kano, Ahmed Kuablar, confirmed the extensive property damage to Poloff, but estimated a death toll exceeding 100, far beyond the GON figure. How many casualties resulted from the military intervention and the ethnic/religious proportions of the casualty count are currently unknown.

WHY DID IT HAPPEN?

16. (C) There is no consensus as to what precipitated the rioting. Rev. Obaje informed us that many of the arrested were recently imported to Kano from Zamfara and Minna. Some claimed their trips to Kano were subsidized. Rev. Obaje saw an evil scheme afoot and former Head-of-State Babangida as its author. Babangida, he inveighed, would venture to extreme lengths to discredit Obasanjo in the North, and keep Obasanjo's Administration "off balance". Rev. Obaje contended that the disruption was not directed against the United States. He believed Babangida had shipped in ruffians from outside as well as funneled money to Kano's militant fundamentalists so they could incite the area boys. Obaje complained that Zamfara Governor Sani contributed to the tumult because of his political blood feud with NSA Aliyu Mohammed, a native of Zamfara. Rev. Obaje said Mohammed had been trying to engineer Sani's impeachment by the Zamfara State Assembly. Once Sani got wind of the NSA's intrigue, the governor has gone into full rebellion, believing Mohammed's antics bore Obasanjo's imprimatur. Sani wanted to see Kano ignite, giving Mohammed and, by extension, the Federal Government a taste of their own machinations.

17. (U) Other observers saw the destruction as nothing but opportunism devoid of any religious or political content. Rev. Nyam, Kano's Anglican Archbishop, stated the rioting was criminally motivated and not the product of ethnic or religious difference.

COMMENT

18. (C) The truth probably lies somewhere between these two contending positions. Not surprisingly, the President's Chaplain would demonize Babangida and Sani, two of his chief's most chronic political migraines. Meanwhile, Nyan's verdict of pure criminality is too facile and simplistic.

19. (C) An Amcit in Kano reported that the days before the outbreak, Bin Laden posters had appeared throughout Kano. Groups of young men could be seen huddled together on street corners praising Bin Laden. Others were passing out pro-Bin Laden literature or his picture. One in every four vehicles plying Kano's streets had Bin Laden's picture in the rear window. Clearly there was significant sympathy for Bin Laden, probably born of long held resentment toward the United States and as a show of Islamic solidarity. As we have reported before, there is widespread perception in some areas of the North that

predate September 11, that the United States is both anti-North and anti-Islamic

10. (C) Conditions in Kano are too complex to attribute the riot to a single cause. Kano, a city of millions and Nigeria's largest predominantly Muslim one, has large swaths of people living in abject poverty. While their penury may be a socio-economic affliction, some view the world and their condition in it through a religious prism. For them, their poverty is the product of an unholy, unjust system of which the United States sits at the pinnacle. There are several militant clerics, many externally financed "cultural organizations" and some fundamentalist cells who feed this anti-U.S. gruel to the disaffected, particularly the street youth. In their twisted cosmology, their criminal acts are legitimate political and religious behavior. This radicalism makes Kano more susceptible to sporadic turbulence than most other Nigerian cities.

11. (C) Our operation in Afghanistan aggravated a pre-existing condition in the city. While criminality, poverty, and local political machinations probably played the much larger role, that the disturbance occurred after Friday prayers and after the anti-U.S. march was probably not coincidental. Anti-U.S. sentiment and religious militancy were lesser, junior partners in this eruption. Fortunately, GON security gained control before the situation worsened. Thus far, there are no reports of violence spreading to other Northern cities. While deployment of the military may squelch turbulence in the short-term, the GON will have to develop a political strategy that begins to neutralize the radicalism currently residing in pockets of the North. If not, President Obasanjo will continually face these periodic eruptions that blemish his stewardship and undermine Nigeria's quest for social stability based on ethno-religious tolerance.
Jeter